



Reactions to a Major Disaster

Following a disaster, people typically describe a range of emotions including relief to be alive, followed by stress, fear, and anger. Common experiences in a disaster include being injured, threatened, or displaced; life threat; being confined to one's home; not being able to locate or losing a loved one or family member; witnessing injury and death; suffering from financial hardships; and having limited access to resources such as shelter, food, water, and supplies.

What are common reactions to a disaster?

Stemming from these events, you may find that you are:

- ☐ Feeling hopeless about the future & detached or unconcerned about others
- ☐ Having trouble concentrating
- ☐ Jumpy & startle easily at sudden noise
- ☐ On guard and constantly alert
- ☐ Having disturbing dreams/memories

You may also experience more physical reactions such as:

- ☐ Stomach upset, trouble eating
- ☐ Trouble sleeping & exhaustion
- ☐ Pounding heart, rapid breathing
- ☐ Severe headache if thinking of the event, sweating
- ☐ Failure to engage in exercise, diet, safe sex, regular health care
- ☐ Excess smoking, alcohol, drugs, food
- ☐ Worsening of chronic medical problems

Or have more emotional troubles such as:

- ☐ Feeling nervous, helpless, fearful, sad
- ☐ Feeling numb, unable to experience love or joy
- ☐ Avoiding people, places, and things related to the event
- ☐ Being irritable or outbursts of anger
- ☐ Becoming easily upset or agitated

Common problems that can occur

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): PTSD is a condition that can develop after someone has experienced a life-threatening situation. People with PTSD often can't stop thinking about what happened to them. They may try to avoid people and places that remind them of the disaster and may work hard to push thoughts of the event out of their head. Feeling numb is another common reaction. Finally, people find that they have trouble relaxing. They startle easily and are often "on guard."

Depression: Depression involves feeling down or sad more days than not, and losing interest in activities that used to be enjoyable or fun. You may feel low in energy and be overly tired. People may feel hopelessness or despair, or feeling that things will never get better. Depression may be especially likely when a person experiences losses such as the death of close friends. This sometimes leads a depressed person to think about hurting or killing him or herself. Because of this, it is important to get help.

Self-blame, guilt and shame: Sometimes in trying to make sense of a disaster, people take too much responsibility for bad things that happened, for what they did or did not do, or for surviving when others didn't. Remember, we all tend to be our own worst critics and that guilt, shame and self-blame are usually unjustified.

Suicidal thoughts: Trauma and personal loss, can lead a depressed person to think about hurting or killing themselves. If you think someone you know may be feeling suicidal, you should directly ask them. You will NOT put the idea in their head. If they have a plan to hurt themselves and the means to do it, and cannot make a contract with you to stay safe, try to get them to a counselor or call 911 immediately. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Anger or aggressive behavior: Disasters can be connected with anger in many ways. After a disaster people often feel that the situation was unfair or unjust. They can't comprehend why the event has happened and why it has happened to them. These thoughts can result in intense anger. Although anger is a natural and healthy emotion, intense feelings of anger and aggressive behavior can cause relationship and job problems, and loss of friendships. If people become violent when angry, this can just make the situation worse as people can become injured and there may be legal consequences.

Alcohol/Drug abuse: Drinking or "self-medicating" with drugs is a common way many cope with upsetting events to numb themselves and to try to deal with the difficult thoughts, feelings, and memories related to the disaster. While this may offer a quick solution, it can actually lead to more problems. If someone close begins to lose control of drinking or drug use, it is important to assist them in getting appropriate care.

Recovery

In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, almost everyone will find themselves unable to stop thinking about what happened. Many will also exhibit high levels of arousal. For most, fear, anxiety, remembering, efforts to avoid reminders, and arousal symptoms, if present, will gradually decrease over time. Use your personal support systems, family and friends, when you are ready to talk. Recovery is an ongoing gradual process. It doesn't happen through suddenly being "cured" and it doesn't mean that you will forget what happened. But, most people will recover from trauma naturally over time. If your emotional reactions are getting in the way of your relationships, work, or other important activities you may want to talk to a counselor or your doctor. Good treatments are available.